Improving Athletes’ Perspectives of Sport Psychology Consultation: A Controlled Evaluation of Two Interview Methods

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Improving Athletes’ Perspectives of Sport Psychology Consultation

A Controlled Evaluation of Two Interview Methods

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Although investigations have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of sport psychology interventions, these methods have been underutilized by athletes. In this study, 124 athletes completed the athletes’ Attitudes Toward Seeking Sport Psychology Consultation Questionnaire (ATSSPCQ) and were subsequently randomly assigned to receive one of the two semistructured interview formats. One interview focused on discussing the athlete’s experiences in sports, and the other focused on delineating sport psychology and its potential benefits to the athlete. Upon being interviewed, athletes were readministered the ATSSPCQ. Discussing sport psychology and its personal benefits was more effective in enhancing athletes’ perception of need for sport psychology than discussing sport experiences. However, neither interview format enhanced athletes’ perceptions of openness to discuss personal issues with a sport psychology consultant and tolerance of stigma associated with sport psychology consultation. Indeed, participants who received the discussion of sports intervention reported a significant decrease in personal openness to discuss personal issues relevant to sports psychology from pre- to postintervention. Intervention effects were similar for male and female athletes. Study implications and future directions are discussed in light of these results.

Keywords: sport psychology; intervention; control; motivation; consultation; enlistment
Public interest in sport psychology is mounting, in part because its interventions have consistently demonstrated success in the outcome literature (see Martin, Kellmann, Lavallee, & Page, 2002). Commensurate with these changes, the number of sport psychology consultants has risen dramatically (Gordon, 1990). However, athletes are often reluctant to contact sport psychology professionals because of beliefs that sport psychology is only for individuals with severe psychological disturbance (Martin, 1998; Ravizza, 1988), and because of stigma associated with sport psychology (Martin, Wrisberg, Beitel, & Lounsbury, 1997; Ravizza, 1988). Along these lines, Yambor and Connelly (1991) reported that males are particularly resistant to sport psychology consultation because they do not want to be perceived as “weak,” or in need of psychological services. Nonathletes have espoused similar negative attitudes of athletes who participate in sport psychology programs (Linder, Brewer, Van Raalte, & de Lange, 1991). Athletes have also been found to be insufficiently motivated to pursue sport psychology consultation because they believe it will be ineffective (Martin et al., 1997). Thus, athletes’ perspectives of sport psychology may improve if they are provided information about sport psychology and its benefits, particularly because the vast majority of athletes have reported that they do not have adequate knowledge of sport psychology (Sullivan & Hodge, 1991).

A commonly accepted method thought to improve athletes’ perspectives of sport psychology consultation consists of sport psychology personnel engaging individual athletes in rapport enhancing interviews. In doing so, psychoeducational information is often informally, and formally, provided with the intent of establishing trust, credibility, and commitment to the respective intervention approach (Cogan & Petrie, 1996). Although widely implemented, we could find no controlled evaluations of such approaches in athlete samples, thus obfuscating the drawing of any definitive conclusions.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to formally examine the efficacy of an interview method that was specifically developed to improve athletes’ perspectives of sport psychology (i.e., delineating sport psychology and its potential benefits to the athlete), as compared with discussing athletes’ experiences in sport. Both approaches were designed to be brief, semistructured, and personalized. To evaluate
outcome, a controlled experimental design was used with method-
ological features such as random assignment of participants to inter-
vention conditions, employment of standardized intervention manu-
als, quantified assessment of adherence to intervention protocol, and
standardized measurement of outcome.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 124 athletes in a southwestern university. Sixty-
one participants (49%) competed in NCAA sports, whereas the
remaining 63 participants competed in club sports or sport leagues.
Participants were of various sport backgrounds, including baseball,
swimming, volleyball, basketball, tennis, gymnastics, wrestling, foot-
ball, softball, and track. Their mean age was 19.6 years ($SD = 1.78$),
and 65 (52%) were male. Eighty-four (69%) were Caucasian, 13
(10%) were African American, 8 (6%) were Hispanic, and 16 (13%)
were of other ethnic minority descent.

PRINCIPLE MEASURE

Attitudes Towards Sport Psychology Consultation Questionnaire
(ATSSPCQ) (Martin et al., 1997). The ATSSPCQ is a 50-item self-
report inventory that measures attitudes toward sport psychology con-
ultation. Participants report their degree of agreement with
ATSSPCQ items using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly dis-
agree, 7 = strongly agree). Although four factors have been identified
for the ATSSPCQ (Harmison & Petrie, 1998; Martin, 1998), only the
following three were used in this study. The Confidence in Sport Psy-
chology Consultation (CSPC) scale provides an assessment of the
athlete’s recognition of the benefits of, or need for, sport psychology
consultation (e.g., “A sport psychology consultant can help athletes
improve their mental toughness”). The Personal Openness (PO) scale
provides an assessment of the athlete’s readiness to pursue sport psy-
chology and openness to discuss personal issues that are relevant to
sport psychology consultation (e.g., “There are experiences in my life I would not discuss with anyone”). The Stigma Tolerance (ST) scale measures the athlete’s tolerance to stigma that has been associated with pursuing a sport psychology consultant (e.g., “I would feel uneasy going to a sport psychology consultant because some people would disapprove”). ATSSPCQ items have been found to have adequate internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and concurrent validity (Harmison & Petrie, 1998; Martin, 1998; Martin et al., 1997), although revisions to the ATSSPCQ have recently been proposed (Martin et al., 2002).

**PROCEDURES**

Most student athletes participated in this study to fulfill credit requirements of an entry-level psychology course. Although the majority of participants were informed of the study through notices posted in the Psychology Department building and psychology class announcements, some athletes were invited to participate in this study during sports team meetings that were held on campus. In an office room, each participant was separately administered (a) an informed consent that was approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board, (b) the ATSSPCQ, and (c) a questionnaire designed to measure global psychiatric functioning that was not pertinent to this study. Athletes were then matched for gender, NCAA participation (i.e., NCAA participant, NCAA nonparticipant), and race, and randomly assigned to one of the two intervention approaches (see the Interventions section below). Upon individually completing their respective interventions (i.e., 1 facilitator per participant), athletes were instructed to again complete the ATSSPCQ. The study measures and interventions were administered by trained student facilitators who had no previous clinical experience implementing sport psychology interventions.

**INTERVENTIONS**

*Discussion of experiences in sports interview.* This intervention focused on establishing rapport with the athlete by stimulating a 10- to
A 15-minute discussion about the athlete’s experiences in sports. The research assistant was trained to initiate a brief structured interview that included four solicitations: (a) why are you interested in participating in sports, (b) what motivates you to do well in sports, (c) tell me about some of the people who influenced you to pursue sports, and (d) tell me about your current sport training program. The facilitator conducted follow-up queries (e.g., “What did your father do that was particularly motivating to you?”) and supportive statements (e.g., “It sounds like you’ve worked hard to compete at your level.”) regarding the solicited information.

Sport psychology benefits interview. In this intervention, a trained research assistant initiated a 10- to 15-minute semistructured interview relevant to delineating sport psychology, and its idiosyncratic benefits to the athlete. The athlete was asked to describe the benefits of sport psychology, and consequently provided empathic statements for expressed concerns (e.g., “Recovering from injuries can be very stressful. It’s terrible that you had to go through that rehabilitation program.”). Supportive statements were also provided when the athlete mentioned how sport psychology could be helpful (e.g., “That’s very perceptive of you. Sport psychology methods appear to be very effective in teaching athletes to cope with injuries.”). The athlete was then instructed to use a 5-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 1 = not at all improve, 5 = highly improve) to estimate the extent each of six coping skills (i.e., learning to cope with injuries and/or pain, controlling negative thoughts, decreasing problems with others, decreasing stress, improving motivation, improving emotional/psychological problems) would assist in improving the athlete’s performance in sports. For each coping skill that was rated relatively high, the athlete was asked to elaborate how the skill would improve the athlete’s performance in sports (i.e., “How could your performance in sports be improved by decreasing your stress?”). The facilitator responded with supportive and empathic statements, and suggested sport psychology methods have demonstrated success in accomplishing the desired skills that were reviewed.

The following paragraph was then twice read to assist the athlete in gaining additional positive perspective of sport psychology:
Sport psychologists help elite athletes and recreational athletes achieve peak performance and personal satisfaction. They help improve self-confidence and motivation, improve communication skills, decrease anxiety and stress, increase team cohesion, leadership skills, eliminate negative thoughts, develop goals, teach relaxation, help athletes deal with injuries and burnout, decrease emotional disorders, like substance abuse and eating disorders, and assist when relationships interfere with performance.

The athlete was subsequently provided the aforementioned description of sport psychology in writing, and instructed to review the paragraph for a couple of minutes. The facilitator then asked the athlete if anything in the paragraph, not previously discussed, might be relevant to the athlete. Again, the facilitator provided empathic and supportive statements, and initiated discussion regarding the benefits of sport psychology to the athlete’s unique situation.

RESULTS

BASELINE COMPARABILITY OF THE INTERVENTION GROUPS

To determine if participants in the two intervention groups were similar demographically, three two-tailed chi-square tests were conducted using intervention group (discussion of sport experiences; delineation of sport psychology, and its benefits) as the independent variable, and ethnicity, sport background, and gender as the dependent variable in each chi-square test. Similarly, a two-tailed *t* test was performed using intervention group as the independent variable, and the continuous demographic variable, age, as the dependent variable. Results indicated that the demographic composition of the intervention groups was similar (all *p* > .05).

To determine if intervention groups were similar in baseline ATSSPCQ scores, three two-tailed *t* tests were conducted using intervention condition as the independent variable, and the three ATSSPCQ baseline scores (i.e., ST, PO, CSPC) as the dependent variable, for each *t* test. Results indicated that the intervention conditions demonstrated similar ATSSPCQ baseline scores (all *p* > .05).
INTEGRITY OF INTERVENTIONS

All facilitators used a checklist that depicted the protocol to be implemented during the respective intervention. Facilitators indicated on the checklist whether each task was performed. Independent raters extensively trained in the treatment conditions then listened to the audiotapes, and indicated on a separate protocol checklist whether each of the tasks had been completed. The facilitators’ and raters’ lists were compared for 21% of the intervention sessions to allow the computation of an estimate of reliability and validity. Reliability was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements by the total number of agreements plus disagreements, and multiplying the resulting dividend by 100. The validity estimate was based only upon the lists completed by facilitators, and was calculated by dividing the number of tasks completed by the total number of possible tasks, and multiplying the dividend by 100. For the benefits of sports psychology condition, the reliability estimate was 97%, and the validity estimate was 98%. For the sports conversation condition, the reliability estimate was 97%, and the validity estimate was 95%. These results suggest the facilitators in both intervention groups adhered closely to their protocol, and protocol adherence was corroborated by objective raters.

EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENTIONS

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of participants’ baseline and postintervention ATSSPCQ factor scores separately for both intervention groups.

To examine the influence each of the intervention groups had on ATSSPCQ factor scores, three separate two-tailed repeated measures ANOVA tests were conducted using gender and intervention condition as the independent variables, and the three ATSSPCQ scores (ST, PO, CSPC) as the dependent variables, respectively. Gender was selected as an independent variable because previous studies have suggested males and females may have different views regarding sport psychology consultation (see Yambor & Connelly, 1991).

*Stigma Tolerance.* The repeated measures ANOVA for ST revealed no significant main or interaction effects (all \( p > .05 \)). Thus, partici-
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>SPC Confidence (Need)</th>
<th>Personal Openness</th>
<th>Stigma Tolerance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion of sports experiences</td>
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<td>0.69</td>
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<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>4.44</td>
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pant ST scores were not significantly influenced by the interventions, and male and female athletes responded to the interventions similarly in regards to ST scores.

**Personal Openness.** The repeated measures ANOVA for PO indicated a significant main effect for time (Wilks’ Lambda = .96, $F = 4.99$, $df = 1, 120$, two-tailed $p = .027$). A post hoc paired samples $t$-test indicated that participants who received the discussion of sports intervention reported a significant decrease in personal openness to discuss personal issues relevant to sports psychology from pre- to post-intervention ($t = 2.64$, $df = 63$, two-tailed $p = .01$). No significant difference was found between pre- and post-PO scores for the discussion of sport psychology and its benefits intervention ($p > .05$), indicating participants assigned to this intervention reported similar levels of openness to discuss personal issues relevant to sport psychology before and after this interview. No other significant differences were found (all $p > .05$). Thus, male and female athletes responded similarly to the interventions in Personal Openness, and discussing sports with a facilitator appeared to lead to less openness to discuss issues relevant to sport psychology and readiness to pursue sport psychology.

**Confidence in Sport Psychology Consultation.** The repeated measures ANOVA for CSPC indicated a significant main effect for time ($F = 30.12$, $df = 1, 118$, two-tailed $p < .001$). However, the preceding result must be interpreted in light of a significant interaction effect found between time and type of intervention received. Specifically, participants in the intervention that addressed the benefits of sport psychology demonstrated greater improvements in CSPC scores from pre- to post-intervention, as compared with participants who discussed their experiences in sports ($F = 4.04$, $df = 1, 118$, two-tailed $p < .05$). No other significant differences were found. Thus, discussing the benefits of sport psychology appeared to lead to relatively greater improvements in athletes’ perceptions of need, as compared with discussing sport relevant experiences. Moreover, male and female athletes were influenced by the interventions similarly in regards to CSPC scores.
DISCUSSION

The present results provide a base upon which to empirically determine effective strategies of engaging athletes in sport psychology programs. A structured interview focusing on reviewing potential benefits that may be derived from participating in sport psychology consultation was reportedly found to be more effective in changing athletes’ recognition of need for sport psychology programs, as compared with reviewing sports related experiences. Moreover, males and females responded similarly to the interventions. However, neither intervention enhanced the athletes’ perceptions of openness to discuss personal issues relevant to sports or readiness to pursue sport psychology consultation, as well as their tolerance of stigma associated with sport psychology consultation. Indeed, discussing sports related experiences with a facilitator appeared to lead to less openness to discuss issues relevant to sport psychology and readiness to pursue sport psychology.

Several conclusions may be drawn from the obtained results. First, employment of the structured interview that focused on delineating sport psychology and its benefits should be considered an initial first step in the engagement of athletes who may benefit from sport psychology consultation. Easy to implement and brief, the obtained results suggest that this interview may be effectively used to educate athletes about the benefits of sport psychology. In understanding sport psychology, and realizing that sport psychology consultation may offer personal benefits, the athlete is potentially less likely to avoid, or resist, sport psychology consultation because of stereotypical beliefs that sport psychology is ineffective or limited to individuals who evidence psychopathology (see Martin, 1998; Martin et al., 1997; Ravizza, 1988; Sullivan & Hodge, 1991).

Delineating sport psychology and its benefits appears to be insufficient in bringing about athletes’ readiness to actively pursue sport psychology consultation, or to be more open to discuss personal issues with a sport psychology consultant. Thus, if an athlete was identified to be in need of sport psychology intervention it might be necessary for the sport psychology professional to initiate the initial consultation after the benefits of sport psychology interview is implemented rather than waiting for the athlete to schedule such consultation. This
strategy would likely prepare the athlete for consultation with no anticipated negative effects in Personal Openness, such as those indicated from athletes who received the discussion of sport-related experiences.

The effectiveness of sport psychology consultants is highly dependent on the quality of the consultant-athlete interaction (Balague, 1999). Therefore, the study results are particularly encouraging given that the intervention was implemented in less than 15 minutes by facilitators who were predominately undergraduate students who had no previous clinical training involving the implementation of sport psychology interventions. Thus, future studies will need to be conducted to determine if the developed interview is more effective when implemented by professionals who are experienced in the practice of sport psychology.

The study sample was predominately Caucasian (69%), with relatively few athletes of diverse ethnicities. Therefore, future studies will need to replicate the obtained results in athlete samples of diverse ethnicities. In regards to gender, Yambor and Connelly (1991) reported that males are often resistant to sport psychology consultation with female consultants. However, changes in ATSSPCQ factor scores did not appear to be influenced by gender in this study. It should be mentioned that although about the same number of male and female facilitators participated in this study, interpretation of gender effects is potentially confounded because facilitators were assigned to interview athletes according to facilitator availability. Thus, gender of participants and facilitators was constant across the intervention conditions. However, facilitators were not systematically matched with athletes to assure equal gender matches between the intervention conditions.

This study is limited in its reliance upon attitudinal self-report measures rather than behavioral indicators of change. Future studies will need to determine if discussing sport psychology and its benefits leads athletes to subsequently seek out sport psychology intervention programs on their own initiative (or subsequently attend appointments that have been scheduled). Such assessment would also assist in determining if changes in athletes’ attitudes about sport psychology consultation are correlated with behavioral outcome.
REFERENCES


